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Title : THE FORAGING DISTRIBUTION AND DIVING BEHAVIOR OF LACTATING CALIFORNIA SEA LIONS DURING THE NON-BREEDING SEASON AT SAN MIGUEL ISLAND, CA

Category : Ecology

Student : Not Applicable

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Abstract : Satellite time-depth recorders (SLTDRs) were deployed in January 1993 (n=6) and 1996 (n=10) on California sea lions at San Miguel Island, California to study the foraging distribution and diving behavior of lactating females during the non-breeding season. The primary foraging area was northwest of San Miguel Island from Point Conception to Monterey Bay, and from the mainland coast to 94 km offshore. The maximum distance from the colony was 366.6 km and the maximum distance offshore was 229.5 km. Females foraged in the continental shelf, slope, and offshore ocean habitats. The mean dive depth for individuals ranged from 20 m to 279 m. The maximum dive depth was 482 m. Most females terminated lactation in early April or early May. Lactating females foraged further from the colony, foraged primarily in the offshore habitat, dove deeper and had longer dives during El Niño conditions in 1993 compared to non-El Niño conditions in 1996. The primary prey species were Pacific hake, Pacific sardine, market squid, Jack mackerel, Pacific mackerel, rockfish and northern anchovy. The frequency of occurrence of the prey species changed during El Niño conditions. A diversified diet and the ability of lactating females to utilize a variety of ocean habitats are adaptations to the varied seasonal and annual distribution of sea lion prey in the California Current. The flexible foraging behavior has contributed to the successful recovery of the California sea lion population over the past two decades despite large-scale oceanographic changes and multiple El Niño events that have occurred within their foraging range.